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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project to construct a computerized database of the treatment of ethnic groups and foreign nations in American motion pictures. The project is being conducted in response to a need for a scholarly examination of how film depicts these groups and nations. Since these media presentations are important influences on public perception, it is useful to assess the continuities and changes that have occurred over time and to compare these with public sentiment. Notes have been taken on over 3,000 films and film reviews. These will be coded on various descriptive variables and on subjective characteristics concerning ethnicity and nationality. Characters in the films will be judged in terms of the following variables: (1) identity; (2) function; (3) treatment; (4) physical and psychological profile;and (5) moral stature. Topics which provide insight into changing American values and taboos will be coded also. The development of the database is a multi-year project which is never-ending, given the number of motion pictures released yearly. The project is needed to illustrate how motion pictures have influenced popular images and how they contribute to global culture. (VM)

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Objectifying the Subjective: Toward the Development of a Computerized Database of the Treatment of Ethnicity and Foreignness in American Motion Pictures

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(Synthesis of a presentation given at the MELUS National Conference at the University of California, Irvine, on April 30, 1987)

Our project is a challenging one--to construct a computerized database covering the film treatment of ethnic groups and foreign nations throughout the history of American motion pictures. Carlos Cortes conceived the database project as part of his long-range scholarly examination of the role of film in depicting and thereby influencing public perceptions of ethnic groups and foreign cultures. Other studies in this area have been limited in time span or restricted by their focus on specific groups, cultures, nations, or global regions. The most extensive work to date is the 1987 Ethnic and Racial Images in Film and Television, by Allen Woll and Randall Miller, in which the authors provide a series of scholarly essays on

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individual ethnic groups. In contrast, Cortes's research and this project deal comparatively with all ethnic groups, foreign nations, and culture areas that have been presented in feature films during the nearly century-long history of U.S. motion pictures.

Our database is designed not only to help us assess the continuities and changes in the film characterization of individual groups and nations over time, but also to compare the characterizations of different cultures during any era. With these aims in mind, we set out to construct a database that would combine quick access and ease of analysis. The scope of the database is huge--more than fifty thousand feature films have been produced in the United States since the inception of motion pictures. Yet the number of films provides merely part of the challenge.

While the ideal research strategy would be to view, analyze, code, and computerize <u>all</u> American films, reality renders this impossible. Only about half of all American films made before 1950 are still in existence. The others have disintegrated, disappeared, or been discarded. Therefore, we have had to assess these unavailable, unviewable, "deceased" films by reading script synopses and movie reviews. Furthermore, based on our analysis to date, we currently estimate that forty percent of all American films contain no <u>significant</u> ethnic or foreign characters and have no <u>substantive</u> ethnic or foreign presence, meaning that the worst-case scenario supposes a relevant target population of around thirty thousand films (and growing steadily). We currently have notes on over three thousand films, more than ten percent of the projected total, and we are

continuously engaged in the time-consuming tasks of viewing films, systematically examining movie reviews and synopses since the beginning of feature films, and coding our analyses for computer entry.

Notes do not easily translate into a computerized database. To facilitate analysis we have developed a series of codesheets that address various aspects of films. First, the "Master" codesheet contains basic information about the film, such as title, releasing studio, and year of release. Second, the "Content" codesheet covers such items as the movie's themes, location (nation, state, and city), and setting (such as urban, rural, or small town), as well as its major ethnic and/or national foci. These two forms offer relatively little difficulty, except occasionally in the area of determining major themes.

On the third codesheet, "Ethnic and National Characters," the subjectivity of our project begins to affect the coding process, even though we have attempted to record each character's identity, function, and treatment in the film as objectively as possible. We have established a numerical code for each ethnic group and nationality, with these codes then assigned to the characters. Such items as the primary physical (fat, tall, strong, attractive) and psychological (affectionate, responsible, untrustworthy) characteristics of each character are also coded, an increasingly subjective decision. However, these elements only suggest the potential role and impact of the character.

In order to round out the character profile, we have devised an admittedly subjective variable, "Moral Stature," that allows us to be more precise about the contextual function of the significant ethnic or national characters in each film. "Moral Stature" includes three different pairs of alternatives: good or bad; violent or nonviolent; criminal or noncriminal. We have combined these three paired alternatives into all possible (eight) three-element combinations in order to provide greater insight into the "moral stature" of the character in the context of the film. For example, a violent, criminal, and bad character almost inevitably throws a negative light on the ethnic group to which he or she belongs. However, many violent movie characters or even criminal ones may not be "bad" as portrayed in certain films. Embodying the long tradition of anti-heroes in American culture, some movies present violent and even criminal characters as "good" within the context of those films. Two examples of this type of movie are Superfly and The Godfather. The changing patterns of the "moral stature" of characters from ethnic groups or foreign nations shed light on Hollywood's contribution to the historical nature of group or national images.

In addition, we are developing a series of codesheets that address selected aspects of the treatment of ethnic groups and foreign areas in film. For example, we have designed codesheets that deal with the topics of the film treatment of interracial love and sex and of the screen depiction of racial and ethnic "passing" (attempting to present oneself as not belonging to one's ethnic group, such as by changing surnames or by lying about background). We selected these two

topics because they provide insight into changing American values, mores, and taboos as reflected on screen.

The development of a computerized database of ethnic groups and foreign nations throughout the entire history of motion pictures is a lengthy, multi-year project. Moreover, it is ongoing, never-ending, and impossible to complete, as several hundred new American films are released each year. However, data coded to date, combined with extensive viewing, the reading of film reviews and synopses, the ongoing examination of primary sources about films, and exhaustive reading of secondary sources on the film treatment of individual ethnic groups and foreign cultures have enabled us to proceed in writing about this topic even as we work on the database.

Cortes has already published numerous articles, written many papers, and given a wide variety of lectures and speeches on the general topics of ethnicity and foreignness in film, as well as about specific ethnic groups, foreign nations, and global areas. At the present time, Thompson and Cortes are writing an article on the historical roots of movie stereotyping, in which they address the evolution of the popular culture treatment of ethnic groups and foreign nations in pre-motion picture Europe and the United States--such as in literature, theatre, and periodicals--and in which they assess the influence of this heritage on early silent motion pictures. Finally, Cortes is currently writing a book-length history of the treatment of ethnic groups in American motion pictures, the first in a three-volume study (the second volume will deal with the treatment of foreign areas in motion pictures, while the third volume

will focus on the socially critical, taboo-ridden issue of the movie treatment of interracial love and sex).

Our database project goal is two-fold. First, we are using it to help illuminate the historical role of American motion pictures in influencing popular images of ethnic groups and foreign nations, as well as in transmitting, challenging, or reinforcing public mores concerning ethnicity, ethnic groups, nations, and world areas. Second, we hope to make this database available to other scholars who are studying aspects of ethnicity and foreignness in film. In this way we hope to further both scholarship and understanding of the role of the mass media in a multiethnic nation and a multicultural shrinking globe.